



For Immediate Release

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***ENZI URGES ACTION TO ENHANCE AMERICAN
COMPETITIVENESS, ENSURE STUDENTS AND WORKERS HAVE
THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TO SUCCEED***

Washington, D.C. – “America no longer enjoys a monopoly on skilled workers or a patent on innovation,” U.S. Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY), Ranking Member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee said today, stressing that to secure our place at the head of the global economy, we must ensure that America’s students and workforce have the knowledge and skills to be successful.

“If we continue on the path we are on, we will not have people with the talents and skills we will need to fill the jobs that will be created over the next few years,” Enzi said. “Strengthening America’s competitiveness requires that students and workers of all ages have the opportunity to gain the knowledge and the skills they will need to be successful throughout their lives, regardless of their background. Lifetime education and training is no longer an option, it is a necessity – for individuals, for employers and for the economy.”

At a HELP Committee hearing titled “Strengthening American Competitiveness for the 21st Century,” Enzi noted several disturbing trends in American education and workforce development, and said that steps must be taken to ensure that employers of all sizes have the workers with the knowledge and skills they require to compete in an increasingly global economy.

“In the HELP Committee, we are using this opportunity to shape policy and strengthen the education and training pipeline,” Enzi said. “Through the reauthorization of Head Start, No Child Left Behind, the Higher Education Act and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) we can make sure that every individual has access to a lifetime of education and training opportunities that provide the knowledge and skills they need to be successful and that our employers need to remain competitive.”

“As we renew and improve these important programs, we must re-build, strengthen and maintain our education pipeline, beginning in elementary school. We need to find ways to encourage students to complete high school and enter college ready to prepare for and enter high-skill fields such as math, science, engineering, health, technology and critical foreign languages. We must also strengthen the programs that

encourage and enable citizens of all ages to enroll in postsecondary education institutions.”

Enzi commended the panel’s only witness, Bill Gates, for his efforts to enhance the knowledge and skills of America’s workforce, and thanked him for sharing his views on immigration and the difficulties that surround hiring skilled foreign workers.

“We need to look at how we address immigration,” Enzi said. “On the one hand, many people are concerned about illegal immigration and the impact legal immigration could have on their employment. On the other hand, many employers have a need for trained and educated employees and are unable to fill these positions with domestic employees, leaving them with the choice of hiring foreign workers or moving their operations overseas.”

“The complicated and overly burdensome process for visas and permanent residency cards currently serves as a disincentive to both the employer and the employee. I believe we should continue to work on this issue in the context of larger immigration reform as well as in the context of our international competitiveness. While we work to make our domestic workforce better trained to fill high-tech jobs, we must ensure that our high-tech companies remain in the United States.”

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Statement of Michael B. Enzi, Ranking Republican

Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Strengthening American Competitiveness for the 21st Century

March 7, 2007

Thank you, Senator Kennedy, for holding this hearing today. Employers of all sizes know that a skilled workforce is essential to being competitive in the global economy. Our businesses must have the workers they will need to be competitive. Strengthening America’s competitiveness requires that students and workers of all ages have the opportunity to gain the knowledge and the skills they will need to be successful throughout their lives, regardless of their background. Education and training are integral to meeting this goal.

A substantial portion of our workforce now finds itself in direct competition for jobs with highly motivated and often well-educated people from around the world. We can no longer afford to ignore that over the past 30 years, one country after another has surpassed us in the proportion of their entering workforce that has the equivalent of a

high school diploma. We used to have the best-educated workforce in the world, but that is no longer true.

We must re-build, strengthen and maintain our educational pipeline, beginning in elementary school. We need to find ways to encourage high school students to stay in school and prepare for and enter high-skill fields such as math, science, engineering, health, technology and critical foreign languages. We must also strengthen the programs that encourage and enable citizens of all ages to enroll in postsecondary education institutions and obtain or improve knowledge and skills. The decisions we make about education and workforce development will have a dramatic impact on the economy and our society for a long time to come.

The present situation is discouraging. Every day in the United States, 7,000 students dropout of school. We must deal with the situation head on – we cannot allow students to “waste” their senior year, and graduate unprepared to enter postsecondary education and a workforce focused on skills and knowledge. Unless high schools are able to graduate their students at higher rates than the 68 to 70 percent they currently do, more than 12 million students will drop out during the course of the next decade. The result long term will be a loss to the nation of \$3 trillion, and as you can imagine, even more in terms of the quality of life for those dropouts.

To remain competitive in a global economy, we cannot afford to lose people because they do not have the education and training they need to be successful. Thirty years ago the United States was proud to claim 30 percent of the world’s population of college students. Today that proportion has fallen to 14 percent and is continuing to fall.

Demographics are responsible for some of this shift – keep in mind that if India alone educates just one-third of its population, it will have more educated people than the total population of the United States. We have control over whether we continue to let so many students fall through the cracks and out of the education and training pipeline.

To be successful in the 21st century economy we need to challenge our high school students more, increase high school graduation rates, reduce remedial education at the college level, increase student retention and completion rates for students in college, reduce barriers to adult worker participation in postsecondary education and training. Lifetime education and training is no longer an option, it is a necessity – for individuals, for employers and for the economy.

Innovation provides a way for individuals to create their own jobs or jobs for others. That is one of the primary reasons I began my annual free Inventors Conferences in Wyoming in 2004 – to encourage and provide resources to individuals to impact the economy with their ideas. Too often, young people in Wyoming start thinking at too early an age that they will have to leave the state to find a good job. I offered another suggestion - create your own product - create your own job. That kind of mindset will encourage creativity and begin to tap the well of good ideas so many of our state’s young people have to share. We can attract businesses, but we can grow our own new

businesses too. Good ideas generate good jobs and that is something that will keep our kids at home and attract new businesses to our state.

I have had terrific role models, such as Dean Kamen, speak at my conference. I am hosting the Inventors Conference again in Wyoming this April. We need to encourage this kind of activity because America no longer holds the sole patent on innovation. Inspired by our example, countries such as China, India and South Korea have invested heavily in education, technology and research and development. Billions of new competitors are challenging America's economic leadership. In 2005, foreign-owned companies were a majority of the top 10 recipients of patents awarded by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

In addition, we need to look at how we address immigration. Many people are concerned about illegal immigration and the impact legal immigration could have on their employment. Many employers have a need for trained and educated employees and are unable to fill these positions with domestic employees. The companies are often faced with the choice of hiring foreign workers or considering moving their operations overseas.

In the high tech sector and across the nation, I believe employers must be a partner in ensuring that employees are in the United States legally and holding the proper visas and work permit. It is clear, however, that the current system is not working. The complicated and overly burdensome process for visas and permanent residency cards serves as a disincentive to both the employer and the employee.

Initial efforts have been taken to address the problems with the H-1B visa process and immigration in general but no final action has been set. Congress has considered legislation that specifically addresses foreign workers with masters or higher degrees from accredited U.S. universities to return or stay in the United States. I believe we should continue to work on this issue in the context of larger immigration reform as well in the context of our international competitiveness.

While we work to make our domestic workforce better trained to fill high-tech jobs, we must ensure that our high-tech companies remain in the United States.

We have our work cut out for us to meet the challenge of ensuring that America expands its competitive edge. We need a plan. We need to ensure opportunities are available to all Americans, because our future depends on widely available and extensive knowledge and training and a commitment to excellence. Strong partnerships and alignment among K-12 schools, institutions of higher education, business and government will help us meet the needs.

In the HELP Committee, we are using this opportunity to shape policy and strengthen the education and training pipeline. Through the reauthorization of Head Start, No Child Left Behind, the Higher Education Act and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) we can make sure that every individual has access to a lifetime of education and training

opportunities that provide the knowledge and skills they need to be successful and that our employers need to remain competitive.

As important as education is to the knowledge and skills of our workforce, I want to emphasize the need to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act. It strengthens connections with economic development, links training to the skill needs of real jobs, and supports greater business engagement.

In a global economy where innovation and technology have created an increasing demand for skilled workers, access to training that prepares workers to meet these challenges is essential. The skills needed to keep current with the requirements of the 21st century workplace are changing at an ever increasing pace. Workforce development is not only hiring the right worker, but knowing how to help them keep current with escalating skill requirements and advances in their occupations. By helping low-wage workers advance in their jobs, entry level jobs will open up and more opportunities will be created. Our efforts in reauthorizing the Workforce Investment Act must ensure that it achieves this goal and is relevant to both employers and workers.

I look forward to hearing the contribution of our witness to this vital conversation.

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